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A Period Drama

Andrew Sneddon

Abstract

The cultural geographer and philosopher David Harvey suggests that, “those who reside in a place (or who hold the fixed assets in place) become acutely aware that they are in competition with other places for highly mobile capital. Places therefore differentiate themselves from other places and become more competitive, perhaps antagonistic and exclusionary with respect to each other in order to capture or retain capital investment.”¹

This paper sets out to explore the powerful and lasting sense of place created by a British film through its choice of location. For instance, *Trainspotting*, (1996) directed by Danny Boyle was set in Edinburgh, the drug capital of Europe in the 90’s but was predominantly filmed on locations in Glasgow. Nevertheless the film has developed an urban mythology and a proud almost cult following in Edinburgh. *Women in Love* (1969) directed by the late Ken Russell attracts special attention within this paper as the famous naked wrestling scene was wrongly attributed to have been shot on location at Bretton Hall, now home to Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP) but was filmed at Elvaston Castle in Derbyshire. It was during an artist-in-residence project at YSP recently I unexpectedly came across this fact. I created and proposed a site-specific artwork to be shown within the grounds at Bretton Hall, but unfortunately was denied the opportunity. My proposed project had upset the commonly held belief that the famous wrestling scene had been filmed at Bretton Hall, a belief that had been ferociously protected and cultivated for some forty-years and had formed much of the historical narrative and mythology of Bretton Hall.

Artists have long been interested and influenced in Cinema, in particular its temporal and relational processes seem to shape and construct an experience of place. My paper is informed by a rethinking of place within both social geography and art practice, which gives rise to an understanding of place as a mutable concept.

Key Words: Place, authenticity, mobile-capital, mythology, visual art, heritage, cinema, site-specific, location, situated-practice.

*'I do not claim to be a literary critic, but I know dirt when I smell it, and here is dirt in heaps — festering, putrid heaps which smell to high heaven',*² wrote, W. Charles Pilley for the weekly periodical, *John Bull* in 1921 of D. H. Lawrence's eponymous novel, *'Women in Love'* of 1920. The novel as well as the film adaptation directed by Ken Russell nearly 40 years latter has attracted much publicity over its sexual subject matter at the time and today. The film still continues to generate much discussion among those who have studied both film and book over the years. The film portrays social, political and class struggles in the early 1900's England. It also picks up and analyses repressed sexual tensions and taboos of the Edwardian period. This paper doesn't allow for an in-depth analysis of all these concerns but instead focuses on the historical legacy of a particular scene within Ken Russell's film adaptation of D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*, starring Oliver Reed, Alan Bate, Glenda Jackson, and Jennie Linden of 1969.

At the time of its release, *'Women in Love'* was seen as 'racy' and tested the limits of decency set by the British Board of Film Censors. A year or so later Russell was to direct *'The Devils'* (1971) again an adaptation, this time of Aldous Huxley's book of 1952 *'The Devils of Loudun'*. By comparison the later film was much more controversial due to its combination of religious themes and imagery combined with violent and sexual content. One scene in particular from *'Women in Love'* still courts much debate today, a scene allegedly filmed on location at Bretton Hall, the grand Hall designed in part by the Victorian architect George Basevi (1794–1845) which quietly nestles in what are now the grounds of Yorkshire Sculpture Park. As artist in residence at YSP in the summer of 2009 I was enthusiastically informed, with certitude, that the famous wrestling scene between Oliver Reed and Alan Bates was filmed on the site whilst being directed to a marble fireplace, called the Basevi Fireplace. After watching the film and studying the infamous scene it was clear that the two fireplace designs did not match. Unfortunately the location of the filming was wrongly attributed. It would appear that the story told by tour guides and stakeholder at YSP would appear to have been wrongly attributed for over forty years. The scene's surrounding rich gold-leaf detail and architecture is in the Victorian Gothic Revival style while in comparison the architectural details of Bretton Hall are clearly more subdued and restrained. The reception of the scene's new provenance was met at first by YSP staff and stakeholders as disbelief and then with much disappointment. The strong reaction to this news prompted me to question why this scene should be so important and valued.



Figure 1. The Basevi Fireplace, Bretton Hall (YSP)

The reception I received as artist-in-residence and ‘messenger’ of bad news disturbed the hospitality and dynamic of the relationship between host and guest in the normal friendship of an artist-in-residency project. The resulting artwork and its journey reflect upon the power of place-making (true or false) and the making of a response to context and situation. It is also my intention to share the discoveries, reasoning, and resolutions of a response to the residency experience within the context of a situated practice.

My initial aspiration for the eight-week residency in the summer of 2009 was to make reference to the relation of the contemporary settings of the grounds with the historical context of the Estate and rolling countryside. The opportunity of time and space to think about this context was a huge attraction as ideas came and went but what stayed constant was the desire to respond in some way to the immediate environment. A belief in John Latham’s idea, indeed the Artist Placement Groups, (APG) mantra, that ‘context is half the work’ was a difficult proposition to ignore, particularly in the realms of a residency.³

The residency came shortly after I had completed a co-authored book with Kiyoshi Okutsu and Gavin Morrison, in which we consider Chikamatsu Monazaemon (1653–1724) remark that ‘art is something which lies in the slender margin between the real and the unreal’.⁴ Chikamatsu Monazaemon was referring to the need for eminent Kabuki actors to imitate real characters in favor of fictitious characters. The book borrows Chikamatsu’s statement in order to explore the connection between the representation of raw nature or wilderness and that of idealised nature or nature improved. The additional context of the residency, taking place at the same time as the exhibition of the work by Isamu Noguchi made the opportunity more relevant. There seemed a strong link between some of the sources, references, and ideas generated by the book and the context of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park and the Bretton Estate.

As I walked around the grounds with people who had an intimate knowledge of the estate, the clues and markers of the estate's archaeology and history became visible and the trained eyes of those around me identified elements that I had overlooked or misunderstood. I was interested in producing a response which would appear initially incongruous to its setting but which might, through its lifetime, become adopted by its context. This new insight into the history of the place became key in providing a site specific and poetic response to the residency.

Walking through the Estate and making notes and sketches informed the early understanding of the landscape. There is a short passage in, *Patience (After Sebald): A walk through The Rings of Saturn* (Grant Gee, 2010) where the British travel writer, Robert Macfarlane makes the distinction that walking is like recovery to the British whereas walking is like discovery to Americans. Initially, I felt that he solely meant recovery as healing in terms of walking in terms of recuperation but now I also read this statement as recovery as recalling, bring or call to mind the awakening of an idea. This notion of recovery as retrieving was further developed through discussions with the Estate's in-house archivist, Leonard Bartle, who generously provided valuable historical research material that I followed up by site visits to Bretton Hall and Elvaston Castle. On entering the Wentworth Room on the ground floor of Bretton Hall you are immediately informed of its role as the backdrop to films infamous naked wrestling scene between Oliver Reed and Alan Bates in front of a roaring fire which was supposedly filmed in this room. A small printed notice next to the left-hand side of the Basevi fireplace confirms this. Through further research this iconic scene that was discovered to have been filmed on location at Elvaston Castle near Derby, not Bretton Hall.



Figure2/3, Elvaston Castle and interior, Derbyshire, UK.

This mistaken identification sparked my interest in how a place can encapsulate memories. I am reminded of James Joyce's note in the margins of his manuscript of *Ulysses*: 'Places remember events'.⁵ I have often wondered how this act of transference of memory from spaces to individual works, how buildings, rooms, spaces absorb events into their very fabric only to release a sense of these events at a later date. The observation made by Joyce has always seemed to me to be a truism as certain places can resonate feelings of past occupations or actions. I suppose we only need to think of the ghost story set in an old haunted house to understand Joyce's thinking. But how can a memory of a non-existent event be felt by so many for so long without being discovered to be a falsehood?

Many may not be familiar with the entire film, which surrounds the intimate and emotional relationship between four main characters: two sisters, Gudrun and Ursula Brangwen, played by Glenda Jackson and Jennie Linden respectively, Gerald Crich, played by Oliver Reed, and Alan Bates as Rupert Birkin. However, many seem aware of the naked wrestling scene between Oliver Reed and Alan Bates. Both book and film are widely regarded as addressing the dynamics of personal relationships and the development of difficult and at times destructive friendships; they also address social relationships, sexual tension, and intrigue of a stifling Edwardian society. Both D. H. Lawrence and Ken Russell seem to be actively probing and testing the boundaries and value systems of the 1920s and late 1960s, which are explored in the constantly altering relationship between characters and is also articulated between differing gendered roles in society at these times.

The backdrop of roaring fire and flickering light combined with clever editing would appear to owe much to the scenes success in seeping into our psyche or memory banks. The cultural geographer and philosopher David Harvey suggests:

Place, in whatever guise, is like space and time, a social construct. This is the baseline proposition from which I start. The only interesting question that can then be asked is: by what social process(es) is place constructed?⁶

With a preliminary idea in mind, that of a connection to a place through a mistaken social construct I began to study this particular scene from the film and also at the same time I started considering possible sites where I might screen the film or re-edited fragments, or a variety of still images incorporating the real site and the alleged site. This was fascinating and brought up new approaches and

possibilities for considering a response to place and a possible outcome to the residency.

After carefully studying the scene in some depth, identifying the different camera angles, audience view-points, and editing sequences in relation to the audio track and dialogue I was attracted to the first section where the two actors are wrestling in front of the fire. I believed by identifying this selection I was respecting the original stimuli of the fireplace that became important in identifying the correct location. The scene chosen has the fireplace in a central position. I had decided to edit out all other camera shots but to retain the audio track, which is predominantly huffing, puffing and groaning with minimal dialogue. When the screen had no image visible the sound was still present. There were only five or six scenes lasting three or four seconds each with the remaining sequence reduced to black.

In closely studying the entire scene I became conscious of feeling uncomfortable watching two naked men wrestling in front of an open fire. This led me to question why I, like so many other viewers, should feel so uncomfortable. Or is it something to do with Russell's fascination and taste for depicting the darkness of sexual power throughout the film. *Women in Love* was not only the first feature film to show full-frontal male nudity but it also depicted two naked men engaged in an act that is deeply homoerotic and also unsettlingly aggressive. It may seem tame by today's standards but considered shocking forty years ago.

For me, however, in watching segments of the film repeatedly and as a whole, it seems that more importantly it is about relationships and the complexity of friendship. In an interview about the film from 1971 Alan Bates says:

I think people are immediately drawn to try and understand themselves through the sensual. He seems to be able to touch on things that most people are perhaps obsessed with, or at least concerned with. And those fundamental basic relationships are explored through the film and in Lawrence's writing between men and women, between women and women, and between men and men: he understands them all.⁷

After a period of reflection I refocused my attention on the second section of the scene in which the two principal male actors are engaged in a very close embrace that in many ways can make the viewer even more uncomfortable. This allowed the focus to move away from the fireplace as being the central motif in the

thinking behind the re-edit and to concentrate more directly on any possible link with an audience. I felt a strangely voyeuristic feeling whilst studying the footage; this can be further demonstrated in an anecdote. While studying the scene at home, timing and making notes on the editing, I was oblivious to my thirteen-year old son looking over my shoulder. He innocently asked ‘What you doing?’ saw what was on screen and instantly shouted to his mother “Dad’s watching naked men”, at which point I could feel the colour drain from my face as I struggled to construct a defence.

The final edit is a repeated and looped section of the scene with an out of sync sequence of audio track. If the piece were to be revisited a number of times by a viewer, s/he would probably revisit a different visual with a different accompanying audio track. By singling out this particular section the final edit now allows for a monocular vision of the work to be experienced by the audience that strengthens and refers to a subjective voyeuristic experience.

In order to capture the uneasiness and the voyeuristic aspects of the scene I felt that the display of the re-edited sequence should be carefully considered in both contexts of the film and the Estate. The intention would be to use a storage cupboard in the Camellia House. The installation of the audio/visual piece inside a cupboard would allow the work to be experienced first by hearing it and hopefully this might encourage an audience to track the sound back to the door. Hopefully, upon reaching the door viewers will be inquisitive enough to peer through the existing hole for the absent handle, thus adopting a peeping Tom stance and effectively embracing the voyeuristic monocular viewpoint. The stance and audience participation envisioned would be similar to Duchamp’s permanent installation from 1969 of *Etant Donnés* in the Philadelphia Museum of Art in which the audience/spectators are encouraged to peer through a hole in a door through into a strangely sensual place that has attracted a variety of diverse scholarly activity.

Residencies and commissions can be incredibly influential for artists and while they may often provide eureka-type moments, they are seldom without strings attached. They are contractual between host institution or organisation and individual or group; sometimes the contract is formally written down and signed or it may simply be a tacit understanding between both parties. There is, however, a common agreement that the invited guest’s role in this contract is to deliver and the host’s role is to facilitate, and neither can uphold their part of the bargain without the assistance of the other.



Figure 4, The Camellia House at Bretton Hall within the grounds of Yorkshire Sculpture Park, intended location/site for '*Period Drama*'. Not realised.

The residency at YSP followed a conventional path that involved research and experiments through a series of trials and errors. Much of the research borrowed methods not unfamiliar to the realms of geography, anthropology or cultural studies by way of fieldwork or interview. On reflection, this methodology – or a variation of it – of borrowing from other disciplines in a pseudo-scientific fashion is a common practice adopted by artists and accepted by host organisations. As Miwon Kwon suggests, that this approach can ‘easily become extensions of the museum’s own self-promotional apparatus, while the artist becomes a commodity with a special purchase on “criticality”⁸. Artists can sometimes find themselves in a tricky position between honouring a contract and working with an organisation. As Isabelle Graw notes, ‘the result can be an absurd situation in which the commissioning institution (the museum or gallery) turns to an artist as a person who has the legitimacy to point out the contradictions and irregularities of which they disapprove’.⁹

Locations or sites referred to in cinema and television can have a notable impact on popularity and tourism, and can generate significant revenue. For example, *The Duchess*, filmed on location at Chatsworth House and Kedleston Hall in 2008, or *The Da Vinci Code*, from 2006, featuring Rosslyn Chapel, have brought great financial revenue to the local communities through increased tourism, to name only a couple. These locations and many others have seen an increase in tourism and have added to a growing industry, particularly popular for foreign tourists and tour operators catering to the ‘tea and wee’ sector.

There is a clear difference in identity and status between Bretton Hall and Elvaston Castle. Bretton Hall is surrounded by Yorkshire Sculpture Park and benefits from a steady stream of international and national visitors with a strong and distinctively recognizable identity by regularly hosting exhibitions by internationally acclaimed artists. Between March 2007 and January 2008, Andy Goldsworthy returned to YSP for the largest exhibition ever curated at the Park, so popular was the public interest in the exhibition that it caused tailbacks north and south on the M1 motorway. Richard Sennett would say that some ‘places are full of time’ and brim with ‘cosmopolitan opportunity’¹⁰ such as Bretton Hall and YSP. Whereas some places exhibit a ‘drudgery of place’ tied there where time seems fixed and unchanged. Such places remain heavy with time. Some places are thus left behind in the ‘slow lane’ as with Elvaston Castle with its run-down, forgotten, lacking a marketable identity and the wherewithal to compete with other places for lucrative mobile capital. Robins suggests that there is a desperate need for places to create strong identities if they wish to survive.

The driving imperative is to salvage centred, bounded and coherent identities—place identities for placeless times. This may take the form of the resuscitated patriotism and jingoism that we are now seeing in a resurgent Little Englandism. Alternatively...it may take a more progressive form in the cultivation of local and regional identities or in the project to construct a continental European identity.¹¹

I have attempted to explore and share the thinking behind the response to an artist in residence opportunity and the journey of response in connection to a particular context and situation. The serendipitous discovery of the mistaken provenance of the naked wrestling scene from *Women in Love* and my attempt to represent the scene in an unfamiliar manner behind a closed door endeavoured to convey the strangely uncomfortable but nevertheless compelling attraction to an iconic piece of British film-making was not intended to spoil a myth but set out to explore the idea that place is a social construct.¹² The hospitality extended to me during the short residency was greatly appreciated and my response was an attempt to celebrate the importance of friendship and the complex and often conflicting challenges between guest and host. I am reminded of the saying ‘never let the truth get in the way of a good story.’

Notes

¹ John Bird *et al*, *Mapping the Futures, Local cultures, Global change*, David Harvey’s essay, From space to place and back again: reflections on the condition of Postmodernity, London: Routledge, 1993, p.7.

² R.P. Draper, *D.H. Lawrence: The Critical Heritage*, London: Routledge, 1970, p.14.

³ John Albert Walker, *Left Shift: Radical Art in 1970’s Britain*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2002, p.54.

⁴ Gavin Morrison, Kiyoshi Okutsu, Andrew Sneddon, *The Slender Margin between the Real and the Unreal*, London: Artwords Press, 2007.

⁵ Tacita Dean, Jeremy Millar, *Artworks: Place*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2005, p.14.

⁶ John Bird, Barry Curtis, Tim Putnam, and Lisa Tickner, *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, London: Routledge, 1993, p.5.

⁷ Brian McFarlane *An Autobiography of British Cinema* interview date: November, 1995, 1997. Viewed 20th June 2013, <http://alanbates.com/abarchive/film/wil.html>

⁸ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another*, Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2004, p.47.

⁹ Isabelle Graw, 'Field-Work', *Flash Art*, November/December 1990, p. 137.

¹⁰ Sennett, Richard. *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities*, W.W.Norton & Co, New York, (1991) Chapter 7 Places full of Time p.176.

¹¹ Robins, Kevin. (1991) 'Tradition and translation: National culture in its global context', in J.Cornier and S.Harvey (eds) *Enterprise and Heritage*, London: Routledge, p 41.

¹² John Bird *et al*, *Mapping the Futures, Local cultures, Global change*, David Harvey's essay, From space to place and back again: reflections on the condition of Postmodernity, London: Routledge, 1993, p.5.

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